

Unionizing Global Logistics: Seizing the Chokepoints

Thursday 1 November 2018, by [ALIMAHOMED-WILSON Jake](#), [BROWNE Chris](#), [FOX-HODESS Katy](#), [MOODY Kim](#) (Date first published: 9 October 2018).

In the logistics industry, from port workers to truckers to delivery drivers, time is of the essence. Their potential control over that time gives workers enormous leverage in the global economy.

Today's global economy [relies](#) on the steady flow of goods, products, and raw materials around the world. Companies like [Amazon](#) have become so massive that they now ship as many as four hundred packages per second. But this all depends on the labor of millions of workers in docks, warehouses, and logistics centers. If the global supply chain is broken, capitalism grinds to a halt.

This "[logistics revolution](#)" has opened up both new fronts and unique challenges in worker organizing. If the labor movement and the Left want to [take advantage of it](#), they'll have to understand both its global implications and shop-floor realities.

With this in mind, Chris Browne of the [Pluto Books](#) podcast [Radicals in Conversation](#) spoke to some key researchers and organizers in the field: Jake Alimahomed-Wilson, professor of sociology at California State University, Long Beach and co-editor of [Choke Points: Logistics Workers Disrupting the Global Supply Chain](#); Katy Fox-Hodess, a lecturer in work, employment, people, and organizations at the University of Sheffield; and Kim Moody, a founder of *Labor Notes* and the author of numerous books on US labor, most recently *On New Terrain*, and a visiting scholar at the Centre for the Study of the Production of the Built Environment at the University of Westminster.

CB

What is the [logistics](#) industry? And who do we mean when we talk about logistics workers?

JAW

If you order something from Amazon and it arrives on your doorstep, there's a whole chain of workers around the world in the logistics sector that moves that good.

Starting from a production worker, it's loaded onto a pallet into a container, and there's six million containers moving right now around the world. The container is then placed on the back of a truck and brought to a port.

The port workers load those goods onto a massive container ship, which seafarers — another logistics worker — move to another port. From there dockers will unload the goods and either port truckers or rail workers — both logistics workers — will move the goods to a distribution center or warehouse, where another group of logistics workers is toiling.

The logistics sector has become a key element in the modern just-in-time global economy. Time is a crucial part of today's capitalism.

KFH

Logistics actually started out as a military science, and it was only after the Second World War that people in the business world started seeing logistics as something that might offer a competitive advantage. Over time, particularly since the 1980s, for transnational corporations that are heavily engaged in international commerce, logistics became *the* key element of competitive advantage.

That's where the power comes from: global commerce as we know it today couldn't exist without the logistics industry. Prior to the 1960s, and in many parts of the world more recently than that, the way goods were moved was so different. You'd have goods produced in a single location, packaged up in a variety of different ways, taken to ports in a variety of different ways, repackaged every step of the way.

What some big corporations figured out was that by introducing some technological innovations — particularly containerization — they could make the process go many, many times more smoothly.

Global logistics sites depend on what Jake called "just in time," where ideally the goods don't spend any time sitting around. Ultimately that's the source of this competitive advantage. Time is what potentially gives workers in this industry a lot of power. If you're able to disrupt an industry that is absolutely dependent on moving things quickly there are huge potential losses for the employers.

KM

I recently got a tour of the area around Chicago where these huge warehouses and internodal yards are. All of them are brand new. The way logistics has ended up being organized is around these huge "clusters."

These clusters are based around large metropolitan areas and all draw on what you might call the "reserve army of labor" — mostly workers of color who came into these warehouses in the last ten to fifteen years. In the Chicago area the official estimate is that there are about 160,000 people in this cluster. That's actually an undercount because they don't count other workers like rail or IT workers, which would bring it to around 200,000.

What they've done is recreate what business in the US tried to destroy thirty years ago when they moved out of cities like Detroit or Gary or Pittsburgh. They tried to get away from these huge clusters of blue-collar workers, particularly unionized ones and workers of color. Now, in order to move goods — across much more spread out production chains than in the past — they have recreated these huge concentrations of low-paid workers.

These clusters are choke points in a very real sense. If you stop a small percentage of activity going on in these places, you back up the whole movement of goods and the economy.

The problem is that although there is organizing activity going on, the unions haven't really learned to function together.

KFH

My first job after graduating from university twelve years ago was as an organizer for the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), the powerful port and warehouse workers' union on the west coast of the United States, which has a long and storied [left-wing history](#).

I was working an organizing campaign at the warehouse of the Blue Diamond almond factory in Sacramento California. California is the largest almond producer in the world, and the vast majority of almonds are exported through its ports.

The union had identified this as a strategic organizing target for very good reasons: the almonds are processed and immediately taken to the port for export, so there should be a good deal of leverage through the supply chain. And yet, though this was a hard-fought campaign with many amazing worker activists who put years into this, ultimately it was unsuccessful. The reasons that it was unsuccessful have a lot to tell us about the difficulties of organizing in this sector.

First, warehouse work tends to be heavily dominated by agency workers or subcontracted workers. Workers in Sacramento faced enormous challenges, despite being in a “union town” with lots of public sector workers. These have to do with the very weak labor law regime we have in the United States.

The company racked up dozens of labor law violations for what are called “unfair labor practices,” and just got a slap on the wrist. It was able to get rid of or discipline key activists and thoroughly intimidate a workforce that was already divided between subcontracted and permanent workers.

We have to be careful when we talk about logistics workers and the potential power that’s there because of their position in the economy. There are so many other contextual factors that are shaping the possibilities for logistics workers to organize. Some of those factors — particularly the role of the state — are difficult to overcome. And it’s even more difficult in other parts of the world.

Colombia, for instance, is the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists, who are regularly assassinated even today. Dockworkers in Colombia overwhelmingly are not unionized, even though they historically had a very strong national union. But after the privatization of the ports in the early nineties, the union disappeared overnight.

There have been fragmented, small-scale attempts to build the unions. Heroic efforts — but if you’re facing state-sanctioned violence, the challenges are clear.

JAW

Speaking of state violence, I wrote a chapter in *Choke Points* with Spencer Potiker on Palestinian truck drivers. In Palestine, Israel destroyed the historical trading seaport there. The airport was destroyed. So, the only way to move goods is via truck, but it’s not a smooth containerized process. It’s restricted by [Israeli violence](#), and security checkpoints. For Palestinian truckers, their class exploitation cannot be removed from anti-Arab racism and Zionism.

KM

You can see the role of state violence in the United States as well. Warehouse Workers for Justice (WWJ), which is backed by the United Electrical Workers, was organizing at CenterPoint, a major warehouse cluster outside Chicago.

They pulled off an [effective strike](#) in 2013, and they were able to bring in several hundred people from outside to shut down the Walmart warehouse. The government brought in the anti-terrorist unit.

Even at a less violent level, American labor law makes things incredibly difficult. WWJ has been working for a decade now and still has only been able to organize a couple of warehouses. These tend to be smaller ones with larger portions of direct employees.

When you come up against Walmart, not to mention Amazon, you're talking about 60 percent of employees being temps or agency workers. Some of the Walmart warehouse workers I interviewed had also worked in virtually every other warehouse in the area. People move from one to another hoping that it'll be a little less bad than the last place they went.

What organizers are really trying to do is develop a leadership core so that at some point, you'll get a kind of explosion. When unions grow, they don't grow little by little but in upsurges. And the upsurges don't come out of nowhere. They come out of years of people trying things that don't work, learning what might work better, and so forth.

Sometimes I compare this to hotel workers where you have a lot of the same problems. You have an immigrant workforce, enormous turnover, but the turnover occurs within the same industry and geographic region. So, at some point these workers become familiar with the way the industry is structured in their area that what [rank-and-file](#) militants and organizers are trying to get across begins to make sense and the possibilities open up for an upsurge.

JAW

Logistics in the just-in-time economy is also a site where labor can play a critical role in supporting anti-racist and anticolonial movements. Katy, could you talk about working with ILWU in the Bay Area around campaigns like Block the Boat, as well as other instances of solidarity between logistics workers and social movements?

KFH

In many parts of the world, dockworkers have tended to be politically radical and engaged beyond the workplace. The ILWU has a history of this going back to the union's founding out of the San Francisco general strike in the 1930s. They refused to load arms to fascist Japan, and then refused to load weapons during the [Vietnam War](#), and similarly showed support for the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Nowadays, they're engaged in all kinds of racial-justice work within the United States, and more recently with Block the Boat in support of Palestine.

In Greece, dockworkers have been fighting against port privatization. They could have taken the position that "it doesn't matter whether the port is public or private; what we care about are our working conditions." Instead, they built a strong community coalition based around the principle that ports should be public. That they're part of the wealth of the nation. As part of that work, they have been heavily involved in anti-fascist organizing in Piraeus and in supporting immigrants and refugees.

I also want to give the example of what is in many ways the most impressive case that I've researched: the Chilean dockworkers, who in 2013 and 2014 organized month-long strikes covering nearly all the ports in the country. Generally, conditions for workers organizing in the Global South are much more difficult, yet we see these amazing examples of workers not only taking these huge risks to organize, but succeeding.

In Chile the dockworkers don't actually have a national union. They have a sort of national network organized along anarcho-syndicalist principles of mutual aid. They have a very clear understanding of their strategic role in the Chilean economy, that the ports are choke points. They are incredibly strategic in terms of thinking about how and when to wage struggles. So they've struck in January, which is the fruit and vegetable harvest (a big industry for Chile). They were incredibly strategic about securing the key copper-exporting ports — again, a huge part of the national economy. And they adopted a principle that ports on strike would not accept diverted cargo from one another.

In engaging in this struggle, they were seeking to win basic bread-and-butter demands for their members, but they were much more farsighted as well. The leaders there told me the most important contribution of the strike was in forcing the Chilean government to engage in tripartite collective bargaining (between the workers, the company, and the government) at the national level for the first time in Chile since before the dictatorship.

One of the main ways that the [Pinochet dictatorship](#) broke the unions was by moving collective bargaining from the sectoral level to the company level. There's no basis currently in Chilean law for sectoral-level bargaining, but by organizing in such a powerful, strategic way, they were able to re-establish that precedent. And they did that in part through building really strong alliances with the student movement, with teachers, with other unionized workers, through international support from dockworkers outside the country.

KM

Returning to Chicago, warehouse workers were not able to use direct action, so instead they won rights through broader social movement alliances. For example, Warehouse Workers for Justice created a coalition with the [Chicago Teachers Union](#) and community organizations working on housing and education in black and Latino communities. That is how they won rights for part-time, temporary agency workers, including the right to bid for full-time employment.

When you look at these warehouse clusters in the United States, it's key to note that they're mostly in the suburbs. The suburbs have changed radically in the last twenty or thirty years — they are no longer “white flight” places, if anything they are Latino and black flight places.

When I ask warehouse workers “what are the main issues,” people talk about hard work and wage theft, but also speak of discrimination and sexual harassment.

A WWJ organizer described it to me. He is a Latino who grew up in Joliet, a town outside Chicago that's home to one of these clusters. He said that the pressures of life in Joliet, as well as in the warehouses, have transformed radically; and he has the sense that there may be an explosion coming in the suburban areas, just as there used to be riots in the inner city.

KFH

Community coalitions like what Kim talks about are so important. Dockworkers for instance have a lot of structural power and appear to be a fairly self-contained, autonomous group of workers. But they don't have enough power by themselves. Dockworker unions in the US and Britain were founded during general strikes and so by definition were heavily reliant on their surrounding communities.

Around the world, logistics workers' unions that become isolated do not succeed. Employers and the state are every bit as aware of the power in choke points as workers and trade unions are. This puts a target on their backs.

JAW

A couple of days ago I met with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF). We were talking about seafarers and the idea that if all logistics workers are semi-invisible, seafarers are the most invisible. We have seen a massive increase in global shipping, but unlike ports or warehouses, we can't see the work that these workers do. These mega-container ships are operated and run by a small group of workers who are facing similar yet very unique circumstances.

The vast majority of seafarers around the world are from the Philippines, followed by India, China, and Northern Europe. To be on board a ship for nine months at a time on a contract, when the vast majority of seafarers oftentimes don't have union contracts and are dropped off at a port or abandoned — thinking about where they fit in as a group of workers when we're organizing the supply chain is so complex and yet so important.

KM

Recently I went to the Labor Notes conference where the Railroad Workers Unite were speaking. They are an unusual case for a United States union and for labor law because they have the right to undertake secondary boycotts. That means that, unlike dockers or truckers, they can recognize picket lines without being in legal danger. I know of one instance where they did this in the nineties — there was a strike of steelworkers in Warren, Ohio and they went to the railroad workers and said, "If we go on strike, can you not transport the steel?" and they agreed.

So, we have to think about how to do that. One of the problems, of course, in connecting this to warehouse workers is that trains don't go to warehouses, there's an intermediate step there and that is the truckers. Think about if there is a [UPS strike](#) later this year in the United States, which is not impossible. If railroad workers join in, the potential there for choke points to emerge is huge.

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